

Subject: Cowrie shells as currency

Grieve, Lucia C.G.

1927-1934

[Westerleigh, S.I., +

Flushing, Queens]

211 Wardwell Avenue,

Westerleigh, Staten Island.

March 31, 1927.

Mr. Wood, Numismatic Museum.

Dear Mr. Wood: When you asked me the other day about cowries, I am afraid I gave a rather vague answer, for I had not thought of them for years. But, one by one, memories have been coming back. Where I saw them in common use was in the open-air market at Satara. The venders sat on the ground, with their produce heaped on a blanket beside them, and on one corner a little heap of cowries. The coins went into a bag.

The country people behind Satara are very primitive. Many of the low castes cannot count above three. When a number goes beyond three threes, they have some system which I was never able to make out. The smallest coin in use in Satara is the pice, paisa, value one-half cent. (In the south they use chukrums; the Moslems have dumdi; and Government recognizes the pie, twelve to the anna.) The value of the pice is 80 cowries. It is impossible for the country people to count thus far; so they use them by measure. The smallest measure is what we might call a clutch or a fistful, as much as one can take up in the hand, holding it palm down. That averages about 5 cowries. Once I received the equivalent of one-half pice in cowries. The woman, putting her two hands together, scooped a double handful from the heap. There should have been 40 cowries; as a matter of fact, there were 43. Altho unable to count the number, they seem able to estimate the amount with a fair degree of accuracy.

You asked what is the smallest number used. That is the

palm-down handful, averaging about five, equal to one thirty-second part of a cent. The ordinary low caste man has no pantry; he buys his food from day to day. The staple food consists of flat millet cakes with hot curry. The Indian curry is a liquid, hot in both senses; and it is made up fresh every day. It has many ingredients, some say forty; and of these some are required in very small quantities. It is to purchase these minute measures of spices and the like, that the 5 cowrie unit is used.

All money values are relative; and the 5 cowrie unit is not as small as it looks. For country produce is priced very low; a great bunch of "spinach" goes for a pice ($\frac{1}{2}$ cent); a quart of millet for an anna (2 cents); and other things in proportion. Cowries are useful also for giving to holy beggars; I saw a woman throw two into a man's begging bowl.

I hope you will pardon my using the type-writer; it seemed a good deal to put on note-paper. I fear there was more domestic economy than numismatics; but it was necessary for explanation. Hoping this sheds some light on a very small subject,

Sincerely yours

Lavinia C. Grieve

P.S. I am greatly enjoying Beckle's Indian Alphabets.

L.C.G.

April 3, 1927

Miss Lucia C. G. Grieve,
211 Wardwell Ave.,
Westerleigh, Staten Island

Dear Madam:

I want to thank you for your most interesting letter concerning cowries. Notes like these gathered from all sorts of localities and sources make eventually a worth while account of a given subject and I am very glad to get this information and also am pleased to note that you are enjoying Buhler's tables.

Very truly yours,

Curator

HW:MB

LUCIA C. G. GRIEVE
50 HECK AVENUE
OCEAN GROVE, N. J.

Mr. Woods,

American Humane Society, N. Y.

My dear Mr. Woods:

Many thanks for the invitation
to the lecture Dec. 12th. It comes
just before my return to the vicinity
of New York; for after the 13th I expect
to be at 143-40 Ash Avenue, Flushing.

Several times recently I have thought
of you while unpacking some Indian
things. Among them is a "chuckum
board", which I should like to donate to
your Society if you do not already pos-
sess one. It is of some dark wood, six
inches by four and a half, with a handle

P.T.G.

The clinkums (I need not mention) are
so small, that it is difficult to count them;
and in South India (where alone they are
seen), they are spread on a board. This
one contains 13 rows, of 12 holes each.
At the top is an incomplete row of
7 holes; at the bottom, another of 8 holes
— the irregularity intended, I suppose,
to avoid hurting the feelings of the
gods.

It is a very trifling thing; but of
interest, I think; and if you
care for it, I shall be glad to send
it to you. I have pleasant
recollections of helping Miss Rudolph
decipher some of your coins; and I am
still looking for that Jewish kingdom
in India, of which I get fleeting glimpses,
like the Enchanted Mesa.

Sincerely yours,
Lucia C. G. Friend

December 6, 1933.

Miss Lucia C. G. Grieve
50 Heck Avenue
Ocean Grove, N. J.

Dear Miss Grieve:

I am very glad to hear from you once again. Although I have seen pictures of the chuckrum board I have never seen one and we here would be most pleased to receive one of these. I note that you are about to live in Flushing - I also live there not far from where you will live - at 137-17 Franklin Avenue. If you prefer I will come around and get the board sometime when you let me know or you could bring it around to my house and I know both myself and wife would be be glad to see you.

Very truly yours,

HW:JG

P.S. I have just found your letter; and I am taking the things & your house if you can call here, as I must come & see you.
R.C.S. G.

Dear —
MRS. HARRY STEVENS SEELEY
143-40 ASH AVENUE
FLUSHING, N. Y.

April 3, 1934.

My dear Mr. Wood:

Besides postponing my visit to Flushing for many weeks, I was stupid enough to mislay your letter. I brought the chukrum board with me; also some South India — chunks rather than coins, besides a few little silver chukrums. If these are of any interest to you, I should be happy to add them to your collection.

In addition I have a curious ring (it seems curious to me), $3\frac{3}{4}$ inches in di-

annulet, flattened about $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in width
and $\frac{7}{8}$ inch in thickness; handworked, the
two ends brought together in the imitation of
a bowknot. It is so heavy that I thought
it might be gold; but a friend had it
assayed and says it is copper. It is ad-
orned (?) with sunken lines, some oblique,
some straight across, some on the edge.
At first I thought it was a bracelet; then
it struck me it might be some form
of money. It was among my sister's
things; and my conjecture is that
she brought it from Western Asia. It may
be Egyptian or Indian or even Greek; but I
do not think so. Perhaps you could give me some light?

If you will be at the Museum any
day this week, I shall be glad to take the things up to
you.

Sincerely yours.

Lucia C. G. Sieners.

April 21, 1934.

Miss Lucia C. G. Grieve
%Mrs. Harry S. Seeley
143-40 Ash Avenue
Flushing, N. Y.

Dear Miss Grieve:

I am sorry I was unable to get around to see you but nearly every evening for sometime has been filled. I received the night before last the chuckrum board from Mrs. Seeley and I am very glad to have this. As you know, we have nothing like it. Again thanking, I remain

Very truly yours,

HW:JG

Curator